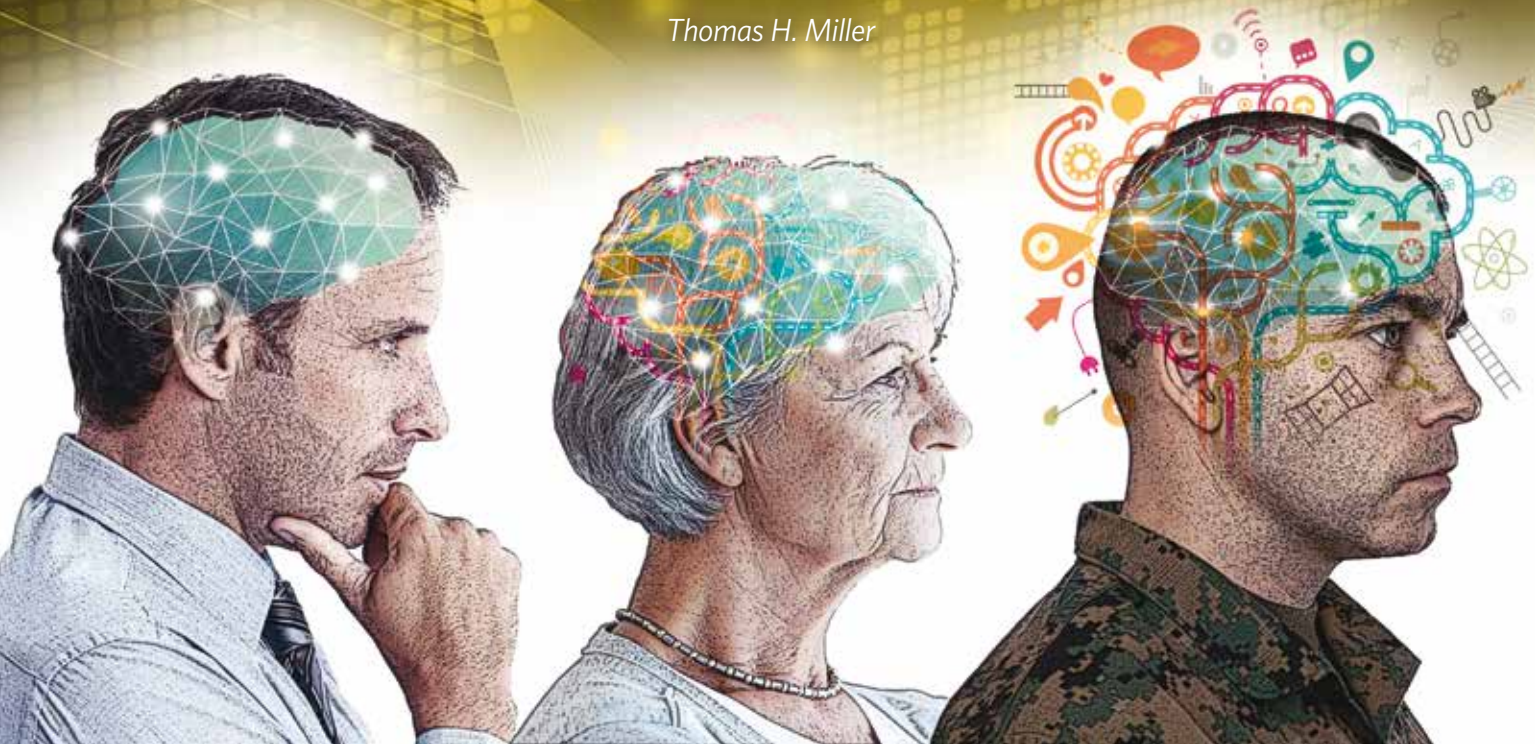


# Are You **Experienced?**

## The Case for Acquisition Professional Qualification Standards

Thomas H. Miller



**M**any professions require both rigorous training and months, if not years, of hands-on practice under the close supervision of experts prior to declaring the trainee proficient enough to perform the job on their own. Physicians are required to complete years of schooling and residency training, as well as pass rigorous board examinations. Airplane pilots require hours of supervised flight time before receiving a license to fly solo.

Defense acquisition management also is a profession. Defense acquisition programs often involve significant technical risks and large amounts of taxpayer funds, and—most important—directly impact warfighter safety and operational effectiveness. Just as we would not trust an inexperienced pilot to fly us or an inexperienced doctor to treat us, we should not trust an inexperienced program executive officer, program manager, contracting officer, chief engineer, or product support manager to plan or execute a major defense acquisition program. Yet too often, inexperienced people—both civilian and military—are assigned to manage and lead all or a portion of these

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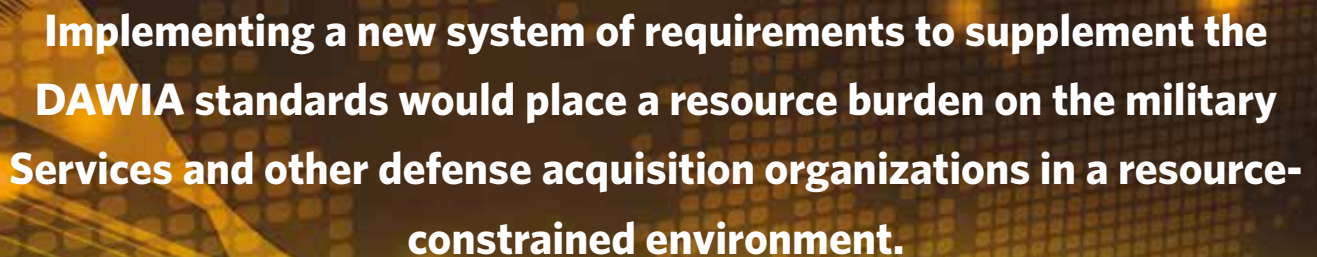
programs. It is my view that this is a proximate cause of the poor program results often reported in the news.

Why does this occur? There are many reasons, including loss of experienced acquisition professionals due to competition with private industry, low morale due to the current budget environment (furloughs resulting from sequestration, for example), heavy workloads that discourage mentoring of less experienced personnel, and the bow wave of retirements. One significant reason, however, is the lack of a clearly defined set of qualification standards that delineate experience-based proficiencies (or skill sets) required to perform acquisition jobs. Without such standards, it is difficult to define minimum requirements for senior acquisition positions, as well as to outline career paths for entry and journeymen personnel who aspire to these positions. This critical gap is negatively impacting the ability of the Department of Defense (DoD) to

program, such as a program executive officer, program manager or senior contracting officer). The memo stated that, "The selection of qualified personnel to fill KLPs is essential for the organization and the individuals filling these highly demanding positions. We cannot afford to add risk to our programs by placing unqualified or unprepared personnel into KLPs."

Kendall reemphasized the importance of this initiative in a March–April 2014 article in *Defense AT&L* magazine: "Defense acquisition professionals have a special body of knowledge and experience that is not easily acquired. ... No one should expect an amateur without acquisition experience to be able to exercise professional judgments in acquisition without the years of training and experience it takes to learn the field."

Despite this clear emphasis on qualification by the DoD's senior acquisition official, there has been surprisingly little action



## **Implementing a new system of requirements to supplement the DAWIA standards would place a resource burden on the military Services and other defense acquisition organizations in a resource-constrained environment.**

meet ever-more-demanding warfighter requirements in a time of global demand for their capabilities. This gap must be filled by the Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD) issuing a clear system of acquisition qualification standards, and by the Service acquisition career management organizations effectively implementing that system. (Note that the term "system" is used to indicate that—in addition to the qualification standards—there should be a system to support implementation and sustainment of the standards, including automated tools for career planning, data entry, and reporting.)

Frank Kendall, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (USD(AT&L)), has made improving the professionalism of the acquisition workforce one of the key initiatives under his Better Buying Power (BBP) policy. He emphasized this initiative in his April 2013 Implementation Directive for BBP 2.0 by stating, "At the end of the day, qualified people are essential to successful outcomes, and professionalism—particularly in acquisition leaders—drives results more than policy changes." This assertion was codified in a November 2013 policy memo from the Office of the USD(AT&L) titled "Key Leadership Positions [KLPs] and Qualification Criteria." This memo defined minimum requirements for KLPs (i.e., key or senior leadership acquisition positions assigned to an Acquisition Category (ACAT) I or ACAT IA

by the Office of USD(AT&L) and the Service Defense Acquisition Career Managers (DACMs) to define experience requirements that qualify an individual for an acquisition position. Even the KLP policy memo cited above vaguely defines experience as minimum years of acquisition experience, including "cross-functional competencies" such as Executive Leadership and Technical Management. The memo also discusses plans to establish "Joint KLP Qualification Boards" to prescreen and qualify a pool of candidates. To date, none of these boards has been set to work. The USD(AT&L) Sept. 19, 2014, preliminary White Paper titled "Better Buying Power 3.0" discussed establishing "stronger professional qualification requirements for all acquisition specialties," stating that "DAWIA [Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act] training and certification process must be supplemented to establish a stronger basis for levels of professional qualification for all of the acquisition career fields." Yet, again, specific policy establishing qualification standards has not been issued to date.

Why hasn't the Office of the USD(AT&L) moved more quickly to implement a set of clearly defined acquisition qualification standards? There are various possible reasons. One concern is that implementing a new system of requirements to supplement the DAWIA standards would place a resource burden on the military Services and other

defense acquisition organizations in a resource-constrained environment. Implementing the system likely would include a requirement for data gathering, tracking and reporting, which could result in significant development, implementation and maintenance costs. However, when considering the cost and operational risk related to unqualified acquisition personnel, as well as the offsetting benefits of implementing the qualification standards system—including the ability to better focus training funds—the administrative costs should be considered a worthwhile investment toward achieving a more professional workforce.

Another—and perhaps more valid—reason for the delay is the difficulty of defining qualification standards for acquisition positions. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines the word “qualified” as “having the necessary skill, experience, or knowledge to do a particular job or activity.” What are the necessary skills, experience and knowledge to perform jobs in acquisition programs? As stated previously, these are complex, highly specialized functional positions that require a “special body of knowledge.” Also, there is something unique in the requirements for each program. For example, someone qualified to be the chief engineer for an ACAT IA information technology program may not be considered qualified for an ACAT ID weapon system program.

Given these challenges, what actions should the Office of the USD(AT&L)—and the DACMs—take to implement an acquisition qualification standards system for defense acquisition? Before I go there, I will quickly recap some previous, unimplemented initiatives that AT&L was previously pursuing, parts of which can be leveraged in implementing the new system.

**Certification to Qualification (aka “C2Q”):** C2Q was AT&L’s initial attempt to implement the BBP initiative for improving the professionalism of the acquisition workforce. The basis for this effort was explained in a May 15, 2013, briefing as follows: “The current Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act certification process ... does not by itself adequately ensure that members of our acquisition workforce are fully qualified to perform their missions ... we need to go beyond certification based on course attendance and presence in acquisition-related organizations to new standards for our workforce that include qualification through hands-on experiences in roles of increasing responsibility.” This in a nutshell lays out the business case for implementing qualification standards. The briefing also identified specific implementation actions, including functional leads defining competencies (skill sets) for each functional area. In addition, the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) was to translate the competencies into on-the-job tools and processes to develop “individual qualification plans.” All this was to be completed and implemented by the component organizations by July 2014. Finally, it identified several implementation attributes for C2Q and stated that “C2Q will consist of AT&L Acquisition Qualification Matrices and Qualification Assessment

Tools,” “Acquisition Qualification Matrices will be common across all organizations and individuals” and “Documentation will be captured in a Qualification Data Repository so that it is accessible to the individual and the organization, and will enable analysis on the workforce to occur.”

#### **Acquisition Qualification Workforce Initiative (AQWI):**

This initiative replaced C2Q. Similar to C2Q, its objective was “Competency-based acquisition standards that are transportable and validated/verified and can be augmented with service/component competency requirements.” Its vision statement (from a May 21, 2014, briefing), quoted Katharina McFarland, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, in part: “AQWI will transform the AWF to be qualified to perform the specific tasks their organization requires ... thru demonstrating their ability to use the theoretical classroom training in real practice under the supervision, mentoring and evaluation of a qualified supervisor or SME [subject-matter expert].” The briefing identified a four-step approach: Develop qualification standards for all 14 functional areas, cross-mapped to DAWIA levels; develop and field a system to host and capture qualifications; develop Service/organizational implementation plans; and sustain the system through updates and refinements. Initial Operational Capability for the system was targeted for December 2015 and Full Operational Capability in 2017.

#### **Program Manager Acquisition Qualification Standards (PM AQS):**


These probably were the most mature of several functional area pilots run through the Office of the USD(AT&L)’s Functional Integrated Product Teams (IPTs). Under the sponsorship of the Program Management (PM) Functional IPT, led by David Ahern, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Portfolio Systems Acquisition, an AQS IPT was established in October 2011 and tasked with developing and implementing qualification standards for the PM Functional area, including processes, tools and documentation. The PM AQS IPT developed AQS workbooks that identified qualification standards for three levels of experience—entry, intermediate and expert—that coincided with DAWIA certification levels. The workbooks included three primary sections: Fundamentals—to test basic knowledge and principles needed to understand the duties to be performed, including training; Applications—to ensure an understanding of how resources and stakeholders impact the program, including key program documents and events; and Experience—which identified key roles that must be performed and actions demonstrated to ensure proficiency at tasks, including “proficiency by doing” in important program events and functional areas and learning from a mentor. All three military Services were represented on the IPT, and each subsequently conducted pilots with representative PM employees, supervisors and “certifiers” (i.e., independent subject-matter experts tasked with validating employee proficiency). Each Service conducted its pilots differently, but the response from the participants was overwhelmingly positive. Participant feedback generally summarized that AQS provided valuable structure in explaining job requirements for various levels of PM jobs, helping

them to develop “roadmaps” for their career progressions. The AQS IPT used feedback from the Service pilots to further refine and improve the AQS materials and associated tools.

So, again, what actions should the Office of the USD(AT&L) and the Service DACMs take to implement an acquisition qualification standards system for defense acquisition? Ample lessons learned from the various USD(AT&L) efforts described above—particularly from PM AQS—support the following recommended steps:

standards policy discussed above—therefore allowing for consistent application across the Services and organizations.

Throughout the implementation, the Office of the USD(AT&L) should seek to minimize resource and administrative burdens on the Services and organizations—for example, by making available funding for activities such as training and development of unique automated tools (if required). The Office of the USD(AT&L) also should establish a Qualification Standards board—including representatives from the Services and other



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- Implement AQS in a phased (crawl-walk-run) process over a two- to three-year period, starting with publishing electronic workbooks and automated tools to assist acquisition employees plan their experiential learning through creating Individual Development Plans (IDPs).
- Monitor use of the workbooks/tools, conduct surveys and additional pilots in each competency area, and utilize the data derived to further refine the workbooks and automated tools.
- Concurrently develop draft implementation policy for qualification standards and provide to the Services and other acquisition organizations for comment. This policy should define the proposed qualification standards process, including the roles and responsibilities of employees, qualifiers, supervisors and mentors. Preferably, this policy should have “teeth,” particularly in terms of defining minimum qualification standards for KLP and Critical Acquisition Positions (CAPs), but should allow for flexibility in how the Services implement the qualification standards system within their organization.
- Issue the final qualification standards policy, signed by the USD(AT&L), accompanied by “road show” information events to help to gain buy-in at all levels.
- Sustain the qualification standards system through periodic updates to the policy, workbooks and automated tools. This sustainment should be supported by continuing data gathering and reporting and “lessons learned” provided through the Services and organizations and Functional IPTs.
- Implement KLP “Pre-Qualification Boards” in accordance with the USD(AT&L) November 2013 policy memo. These boards should leverage the final AT&L qualification

acquisition organizations—to oversee the process, monitor data reports and make adjustments as required.

Many ancillary benefits are anticipated from implementing a qualification standard system for the DoD acquisition workforce. The Department of the Navy PM AQS pilot survey identified three such benefits:

- The standards and associated tools can be used by individual employees as a “roadmap” to manage career planning in terms of improving knowledge and experience and proficiency in key areas. Experience currently is gained through trial and error and luck of the draw with too little mentoring and action learning inside the program and/or project office.
- The standards and tools can be used by the supervisor to prioritize employee on-the-job training and training based on position and/or program requirements.
- And the data derived from using the system can help assess knowledge gaps and focus scarce resources on training and experience gaps across the acquisition workforce.

The benefits of improving the professionalism of the overall workforce should far outweigh the difficulties and costs associated with implementing such a system. It is absolutely essential that every acquisition employee be fully qualified to perform the duties of his or her job, which DoD can ensure only through defining minimal qualification standards. As stated by the USD(AT&L) in a September 2012 policy memo: “A right-sized, requirements-based, and properly skilled acquisition workforce is vital to the Nation’s military readiness, increased buying power, and substantial long term savings.”

## Current Status/BBP 3.0

Where does the Office of the USD(AT&L) currently stand in implementing the foregoing steps? BBP 3.0, dated April 9, 2015, adds more specifics to the initiative titled "Establish stronger professional qualification requirements for all acquisition specialties." It states, "The Department is close to completing the development of experiential/proficiency standards and tasks for each of the Acquisition Career Fields by competency. ... This career development tool focuses on the quality versus the quantity of the experience ... and provides a higher level of measurable demonstration of experience specific to position. AWQI demonstrated experience standards will be distributed to the Acquisition Workforce (via the Components) as a guide to assist in Talent Management with an emphasis on career development. ... The Components will be responsible for their implementation." It also discusses continuing implementation of Joint KLP Qualification Boards, stating, "By May 2015, the Functional Leads will identify which career field leads plan to hold KLP

Qualification Boards ... and deploy the Boards by the end of December 2015."

These are steps in the right direction but are only half measures at best. For example, there is no discussion of an OSD policy implementing qualification standards or of an effort to disseminate more specific definitions of qualification requirements for KLP billets. Only time will tell if the Office of the USD(AT&L) fully commits to ensuring that all acquisition personnel are qualified for their job duties and to providing a support system to help them achieve the hands-on experience required to achieve qualification.

In the meantime, program results likely will continue to be less than optimal, and acquisition personnel will continue to focus on achieving required certifications rather than on developing a more robust individual development plan based on incrementally more challenging experiential learning. &

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## Defense AT&L Magazine an APEX Award Winner—Again

The *Defense AT&L* magazine in June won a 2015 APEX Award for Publication Excellence. The APEX Awards have broad national participation from publications in both the private and public sectors.

APEX 2015 Awards were based on outstanding graphic design, editorial content and "overall communications effectiveness and excellence."

This was *Defense AT&L*'s second APEX award in two years. The award was given in the category of Magazines, Journals & Tabloids—Print 32 or more Pages for *Defense AT&L*'s January-February 2014 issue (Vol. XLIII, No. 1, DAU 236), featuring a cover story on micro machines used in defense systems.

The winners for *Defense AT&L* were managing editor/senior editor of Defense Acquisition University (DAU) Press Benjamin Tyree and assistant art director Tia Gray and the magazine's Editorial, Art and Production Staffs. The other staff members involved in *Defense AT&L* production include Randy Weekes, DAU Visual Arts and Press director; Frances Battle, production manager; Harambee Dennis, art director; Collie Johnson, online supplemental content editor; Michael Shoemaker, editorial support; Debbie Gonzalez, copy editor and circulation manager; and Noelia Gamboa, editorial support.

*Defense AT&L*'s sister DAU publication, the *Defense Acquisition Research Journal* (ARJ), also won a 2015 APEX Award for One-of-a-Kind Publications—Government for its January 2015 issue,



which focused on "Augustine's Laws," the somewhat irreverent observations of Norman Augustine, retired Lockheed Martin chairman and former Army Under Secretary, about the defense acquisition system.

There were 1,851 entries in all categories, including 390 magazines, journals and tabloids from corporate and government publishers at the national and state levels. Other award winners included Ford Motor Company's *Product Information Book*; American Council of Engineering Companies; AARP (American Association of Retired Persons); Computer Sciences Corp.; Merrill Lynch Clear Site; Colorado State University; NASA Armstrong Flight Research Center; the VFW Magazine; Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative; *REALTORS* magazine; and the Military Officers Association of America.

APEX Awards are sponsored by the consultants at Communications Concepts Inc., of Springfield, Virginia.

DAU President James P. Woolsey said: "The magazine is an important means by which the workforce receives and understands the policy of our leadership. ... I can tell you that the magazine is still one of the most ubiquitous reminders of what DAU is, what we do, and how well we do it. ... As with the *Defense AT&L* magazine, the high quality of the ARJ is an important way to present DAU to our stakeholders. Double congratulations to all!"